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Nuts, a Shell Game That Pays Off in Good Eating

Nuts in a bowl are attractive and taste tempting any time of the year and are an American tradition during the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. There is a certain satisfaction in obeying that impulse to crack and eat some of them.

Nuts play an important role in our diet. They rank high for good eating and nutrition.

The many kinds of nuts, broadly speaking, are marketed in just a few forms: In the shell or as shelled kernels; and raw or roasted.

Mixed kinds, in demand both for appearance and variety of flavor, are perhaps the most popular in-shell nuts. They are usually made up of almonds, brazil nuts, filberts, pecans, and walnuts. But each kind of these in-shell nuts can also be found singly at many food markets in late fall and early winter. Other kinds of nuts commonly offered for sale in the shell are coconuts, peanuts, and pistachios, and sometimes pine nuts—the last three generally roasted.

In-shell peanuts are available to most consumers in the roasted form known as “ball-park peanuts.” Actu-

ally, peanuts belong to the pea and bean family, but they are classified with nuts because they are similar in use and food value. A major difference is that around half of the peanuts produced go into peanut butter.

Raw nut meats most likely to be on the grocer's shelf are walnuts, pecans, almonds, and black walnuts. They are offered in a variety of packages, qualities, and sizes of pieces at a wide range of prices. Raw shelled peanuts, brazils, filberts, and cashews appear in relatively few stores to supply a limited demand.

A price comparison between in-shell and shelled nuts may be of interest to you as a buyer. For a method of approach, say that a pound of English walnuts in the shell costs 60 cents, and 1 pound contains approximately 7 ounces of kernels. This cost, compared with the retail price of 7 ounces of nutmeats, tells the story. One pound of other kinds of in-shell nuts will yield these approximate ounces of nutmeats: Almonds, 6½; brazils, 8; filberts, 7; pecans, 6¾; and black walnuts, 3½.

Roasted, mixed salted nuts usually include three or more kinds. Peanuts, cashews, brazils, almonds, and filberts are used most. Percentage of each in a mix varies widely among commercial packers, and is reflected in prices. Peanuts are often the least expensive nuts, and this creates an incentive to use more of them in the mix. In view of this fact, some packers label their packages either “with peanuts” or “without peanuts.”

Some nuts on the market are dry roasted. The term “dry” simply means that no fat has been added. In addition, there are low-calorie peanuts which have had a high percentage of the fat removed. Since much of the flavor of nuts is in the fat, “defatted” ones are milder in peanut flavor.

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Volumewise, processed coconut is one of the most important nuts. It is marketed almost exclusively in sweetened, grated, or shredded forms. Its flavor and texture are similar to fresh coconut. Sometimes, more perishable coconut that is labelled "fresh" is sold in stores where it can be quickly moved for immediate use.

Grade standards have been established for a number of kinds of nuts by the Consumer and Marketing Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Use of standards is not compulsory, nor are packers of nuts required to mark containers with grade designations. However, if a package of nuts is so marked, the packer is legally obligated to make the contents meet requirements of the grade specified. Hence, a grademark on a container is a reliable indicator of the quality. The upper grades provided in each of the existing standards are listed in a table below.

Inspection service is made available at cost to the nut packing industry by the Consumer and Marketing Service and cooperating State departments of agriculture. Government inspectors will, upon request, determine and certify the quality and grade of a specific lot of nuts.

Some packers of nuts have contracted with USDA's Inspection Service to have "continuous inspection" at their plants. Inspectors are present in such plants at all times. A packer

agrees to place high-quality nuts in his packages in return for the privilege of printing the U.S. Department of Agriculture quality shield or the statement "USDA Inspected" on his containers. This shield indicates the best quality grade, and the "USDA Inspected" indicates a very good quality.

Selection of nuts deserves care. Like the cover of a book, the shell of a nut may be deceiving. Fully developed shells can contain defective or poorly developed kernels even though the shells may be bleached or dyed and waxed to improve their appearance.

Price alone is not a reliable basis for judging quality of either shelled, unshelled, or roasted nuts. Price tags may be governed by kind, size, form of nutmeats, a name, or other factors rather than the actual quantity and quality of the nut kernels.

The best aid to the shopper is a statement on the label which shows that the nuts are of a certain U.S. grade, or they have been subjected to USDA inspection, or both.

When nuts are ungraded or do not carry the inspection mark or USDA shield, you will especially need to look for other signs of quality. Sometimes experience will teach you that certain brand or packers' names are meaningful. There are more guides which are related to particular forms of nuts.

Most in-shell nuts are found in the colorfully printed "see-through" bags or "window" boxes. Although these

U.S. Grade Standards for Nuts

Kind of Nut	Grade	Description of quality
In-shell		
Almonds.....	U.S. No. 1.....	Best quality.
Brazils.....	".....	" "
English walnuts.....	".....	" "
Filberts.....	".....	" "
Pecans.....	".....	" "
Mixed nuts (almonds, brazils, filberts, pecans, and English walnuts).	U.S. Extra Fancy.....	Best quality and largest sizes. At least 10 percent but not over 40 percent of each kind in the mixture.
	U.S. Fancy.....	Same quality and mixture, but permits smaller sizes of some kinds.
Shelled, raw		
Almonds.....	U.S. Fancy.....	Best quality.
	U.S. Extra No. 1.....	Almost the best—permits a few doubles and broken.
	U.S. No. 1.....	Very good quality—permits more doubles and broken.
English walnuts.....	U.S. No. 1.....	Best quality.
Pecans.....	U.S. No. 1.....	" "
Peanut butter	U.S. Grade A.....	" "

containers allow somewhat limited observation of the contents, label information may be helpful to the consumer. Nuts which are available in bulk permit thorough, unobstructed examination of individual nuts for good or bad factors which determine the quality.

Nuts with clean, bright shells are likely to contain good kernels. Shells that are dull, dirty, or stained, and those that are cracked or broken are sometimes indicative of defective kernels inside. More important is weight of individual nuts in proportion to their size. The heavier the nut, the meatier the kernel.

Good coconuts are relatively easy to select. First, shake the coconut to determine that it has a large amount of liquid or "milk." This is the most important indication of freshness. Then examine the "eyes," those three small, circular, depressed areas near one end of the coconut. Eyes should be solid—not cracked or punctured. Finally, look over the entire shell to make sure it is not cracked.

Chestnuts can be deceiving in appearance, but there are a few criteria which may guide shoppers. Heavy weight is the best single indication of a sound, fresh kernel. Shells should be somewhat glossy and should be pliable under pressure from the fingers. They should also be free from mold.

Choosing shelled nuts may be a confusing matter to the consumer who is faced with a large assortment of small packages. The task can be made easier and more successful if a few general factors relating to quality are known.

In transparent containers, the contents can be seen, yet nutmeats are protected from oxidation and contamination. Vacuum-packed metal cans more completely protect the contents from effects of air, light, and contamination, but shoppers cannot inspect the nuts before buying.

As a rule, broken kernels or "pieces" are less expensive than whole kernels or "halves" of the same kind of nuts. The smaller pieces are just as well or better suited for a great many uses.

Exposed flesh of broken or chopped nutmeats should be light colored and look fresh, though color will vary somewhat with the kind of nut. Yellowish, oily appearance indicates aging with probable stale flavor or possible early stages of rancidity.

Color of the skin covering the nutmeat may also vary with the age and kind of nut. Although lighter color is generally considered preferable, this is largely a matter of appearance.

Large amounts of powdery material and "chaff" or "meal" in a package may be due to poor screening before packing. However, plastic bags sometimes create static electricity and attract particles which give an exaggerated impression of the amount of meal present.

Close examination of nutmeats in transparent containers will give assurance that they are apparently free from spoiled kernels and pieces of shell.

Roasted and salted nuts can be chosen by most of the same basic quality guides as for shelled, raw nuts. Sometimes the advice of a reputable merchant is helpful.

Keeping quality of nuts depends on the way you treat good ones. Under poor conditions, some kinds become inedible within a month. Ideally stored, these same kinds of nuts have retained top quality for 5 years.

Most nuts can soon lose flavor or develop off-flavor and darken, or they can mold if not protected from air, heat, light, and excessive moisture.

Rancidity is perhaps the worst enemy of kinds of nuts that are highest in fat. Generally speaking, nutmeats are 50 to 70 percent fat, except for coconuts that are 35 to 40 percent fat, and chestnuts with only a trace. The fat reacts with oxygen from the air to cause "oxidation" or development of rancid flavor and odor.

You can keep in-shell nuts that are highest in fat in a cool, dry basement throughout the winter. Shelled ones retain top quality in tightly closed containers in the refrigerator for 6 months or more, or in the freezer at 0° F. for 2 years. The high-fat nuts

keep longer at low temperatures or unshelled and unroasted. Shelled nuts also keep longer if kernels are unbroken (less surface exposed to air), vacuum packed, or are processed with preservatives.

Peanut butter, consisting of roasted and ground peanuts, will deteriorate less rapidly after the container is opened if it is refrigerated.

Fresh coconuts and chestnuts are more perishable than other nuts. If refrigerated, coconuts will keep up to a month and chestnuts should keep several months. Chestnuts must be treated differently from other nuts. They are more like a starchy vegetable and need to be stored in loosely covered containers or ventilated plastic bags. This prevents accumulation of moisture on the nuts but keeps them from becoming dry and hard.

To freeze nutmeats, pack them in tightly closed containers or in plastic bags. Wrap chunks of fresh coconut tightly to expel the air from around them. Cover fresh, shredded coconut with liquid (milk) drained from the coconut. Blanch chestnut meats before

freezing them; cook frozen ones without defrosting.

Nuts are versatile foods. They are shared with the monkeys at the zoo, and they go to the fanciest party. Nuts also "dress-up" any part of a meal—fruit cup or soup, main dish or stuffing, salad or salad dressing, vegetable or vegetable sauce, all types of breads, and a multitude of desserts.

Preparation of nuts may be complete if you buy them already shelled. They are available whole, cut, broken, or ground; and they are either raw or roasted in a number of ways. Some kinds are blanched. Processed coconut is grated or shredded in different ways and it comes in varying degrees of moistness. In-shell nuts, on the other hand, may require considerable time and attention before they are usable.

Shelling nuts is a slow, awkward process for some persons—fun only for snacking. Experience brings more speed and ease and less broken nutmeats. Hard shells may be easier to crack if nuts are first soaked in warm water several hours or overnight. Nutmeats will come out less broken too,

Coconut yule log—frosting with coconut over a jelly roll.





Above, three peanut flavored drinks and peanut butterscotch squares. In photo on opposite page, Roll It In Peanuts is the theme.



Flavor and color usually become richer and nuts are more crisp when roasted or toasted. There are a few nuts, peanuts being most common, which so often reach the consumer roasted that many people have never tasted raw ones. Freshly prepared nuts are always best. It is quick and easy to roast or toast them for snack treats or for use in recipes, but watch them carefully because nuts scorch easily!

To roast or toast nutmeats or processed coconut in the oven, spread in a shallow pan. For richer flavor and more even browning, mix a teaspoon of oil or melted fat with each cup of nuts. Bake at 350° F. for 5 to 12 minutes until lightly browned, stirring occasionally. Salt the hot nuts, if you desire. Add a little fat to help make the salt cling, if needed.

Nutmeats or processed coconut can also be toasted in a heavy pan on top of the range. Heat them slowly for 10 to 15 minutes until lightly browned, stirring frequently.

Roast in-shell peanuts in a shallow pan at 350° F., stirring occasionally, about 18 minutes or until skins slip off easily and kernels are a rich brown.

"Chestnuts roasted on an open fire" are an American legend. Along with extinction of the native chestnut went frequent appearance of this nut in the home. If you are tasting roasted chestnuts for the first time, you will be surprised to find that the nutmeats are sweet and have been softened by cooking. Their texture is somewhat like cooked potatoes; both are starchy foods. And if you're roasting chestnuts for the first time, you may be shocked and have an oven to clean, too, if you are unaware of another characteristic of these nuts. They will explode unless the shells are slit before heating to allow steam to escape. Of course, some say that one nut should be allowed to "pop" and thereby announce that all are roasted.

For roasting chestnuts, slash each nut through the shell on the flat side. Place them, cut sides up, on a baking sheet. Roast at 400° F. about 20 minutes until tender.

but will need to be dried before storing.

To prepare a fresh coconut, pierce the "eyes" and drain out the "milk." Place the coconut on a firm surface and strike it with a hammer in several places to crack the shell. Remove nutmeat from the shell. Separation is easier if the coconut is either baked at 325° F. for about 25 minutes or is frozen before cracking. Then use a vegetable parer to remove the brown skin from the coconut meat.

Removing thick skins from some nut meats gives them a more delicate flavor and better appearance.

"Blanching" is a common term for this process.

To loosen skins of raw almonds or peanuts, let them stand in boiling water for about 3 minutes or roast them. The skins should then slide off easily. Loosen the skins on filberts by baking them at 300° F. for 10 to 15 minutes. Let shelled chestnuts stand in boiling water for 2 minutes. Remove a few nuts at a time, cool slightly, and peel them. Reheat chestnuts that are difficult to peel.

Roasting nuts is an ancient custom.

Using nuts as food was a custom of North American Indians. Colonists no doubt found their inheritance of nuts provided both subsistence and good eating. Nutmeats were added to stews or were ground into meals for breads or puddings. Some were even made into milklike beverages.

Old recipes using acorns as human food only make conversation today—the squirrels can have these nuts. On the other hand, imagine where we would stand without some of the kinds of nuts handed down to us—black walnuts, filberts (cultivated hazelnuts), and pecans.

When nuts are a part of foods, they contribute rich flavor, give contrast in texture, and make a pleasing garnish.

You can substitute any common nut, except chestnuts and coconut, for another kind in recipes. Each nut will, of course, add its own special flavor. Salted nuts should not replace unsalted ones unless salt can be reduced in the recipe. Any peanuts used should be roasted or toasted ones unless they will brown in preparation of the food. Do not use ground-up nuts or peanut butter for other forms of nuts.

The black walnut is the only common nut with such full flavor that it is almost never roasted. It is often the primary flavor of a food.

Nut brittle is especially good when made with most any kind of freshly roasted nuts, including mixed ones. You can even brown raw peanuts right in the candy as it cooks, if desired.

Soups have been one of the least likely places for nuts to appear. The author of the expression "soup to nuts" perhaps never thought of combining the two. Now they seem to be used this way to some extent around most of the world. You can use pecans to make Cream of Nut Soup into a Mardi Gras special or use cashews for a San Juan version. For a Ghana-like peanut soup, use peanut butter.

To keep nuts crisp in foods, add them just before serving or use them as a garnish. Dry or toast any limp nuts such as frozen, defrosted ones before using them.

To extend nut flavor in foods, use small pieces, roast or toast them, or use more highly flavored nuts. Flavor is enhanced when nuts are used with brown sugar instead of white or by adding a little maple or almond flavor to some foods.

Macadamias and pine nuts are not as widely known as nuts that are more available and perhaps lower in price. Either is a real treat.

Macadamias look much like hazelnuts, but are competitors of cashews for flavor. They are good raw, but only roasted ones may be available to you unless you live where they are grown, in Hawaii and California.

Pine nuts are a Biblical food. The many varieties of these pine seeds come under the broad name, "pignolias." Common ones in Europe and Brazil are longer than the popular, tiny "Indian" nuts of our Southwestern States. Some European varieties have a slight turpentine flavor unless the nuts are cooked. The "piñon" (Spanish for pine), which includes Indian nuts, is the most common kind. Confectioners like this nut for a dainty garnish.

Pine nuts are used in all kinds of foods and make gourmet mixed, salted nuts.

You can "experiment" with nuts. Special recipes are not always needed. It takes only a little imagination to make "company fare" of plain food. Many good old standbys are even better with nuts. Start in with these suggestions:

Add toasted nuts to creamed or saucy meat dishes or vegetables.

Serve sour cream with nuts on meat or baked potatoes.

For waffles, biscuits, or muffins, stir nuts into blended dry ingredients before adding liquid.

Mix crisp bits of bacon with peanut butter for a sandwich filling, or use peanut butter and cheese slices for a grilled sandwich filling.

Add nuts to meat, to poultry, or to seafood salads.

Try slivered or sliced nuts in tossed vegetable salads.

Make tiny cream cheese-nut balls to add to jellied salads.

Mix coconut with a food color for garnish.

Roll ice cream balls in tinted or toasted coconut or chopped nuts. Freeze balls separately until set.

Use toasted coconut or toasted, chopped nuts as a quick topping for cream pie or ice cream pie.

Sprinkle cupcakes with nuts before baking to eliminate icing them.

Here are some recipes:

SUGAR AND SPICE NUTS

About 3½ cups

1 tablespoon butter or margarine, melted
1 egg white, slightly beaten
1 cup sugar
½ teaspoon salt
1½ teaspoons cinnamon
¾ teaspoon nutmeg
¾ teaspoon allspice
2 cups mixed nuts (almonds, English walnuts, and pecans)

Stir cooled fat into egg whites. Add nuts.

Mix the sugar and spices. Spread about one-fourth of the mixture in a large, shallow baking pan.

Coat a few nuts at a time with the remaining sugar and arrange in pan. Sprinkle rest of sugar on nuts.

Bake at 300° F. about 18 minutes until lightly browned. Stir gently to separate and coat nuts. Cool and store in closed containers.

SOUTHERN NUT CHESS PIE

9-inch pie

1 cup brown sugar, packed
½ cup granulated sugar
1 tablespoon flour
2 eggs
¼ cup milk
½ cup butter or margarine, melted
1 teaspoon vanilla
¾ to 1 cup chopped pecans or roasted (unsalted) peanuts
9-inch unbaked pastry shell

Mix sugars and flour. Beat in eggs and milk. Stir in fat, vanilla, and nuts. Pour into pastry shell.

Bake pie at 375° F. for 40 minutes

or until a knife inserted in the center comes out clean.

NUT CHESS TARTS

In place of pastry shell, separate the dough into 12 parts. Roll thinly and fit into 2½-inch muffin tins. Add filling. Baking time will be shorter than for the pie.

BLACK WALNUT BREAD USA

1 loaf

¾ cup light brown sugar, packed
¼ cup shortening
2 eggs
2 cups unsifted flour
2 teaspoons baking powder
½ teaspoon baking soda
½ teaspoon salt
1 cup milk
1 cup chopped black walnuts

Beat the sugar, shortening, and eggs until creamy.

Mix dry ingredients thoroughly; stir alternately with the milk into the egg mixture. Mix nuts with the last portion of the flour before adding to the batter.

Pour into a greased 9- by 5- by 3-inch baking pan. Bake about 1 hour, or until a toothpick inserted in center comes out clean.

Cool 10 minutes before removing from pan.

PARTY NUT BREAD

Use ½ cup pecans, English walnuts, or brazils for the nuts. Add ¾ cup chopped, candied fruit and 1 teaspoon grated lemon rind with the nuts to the dry ingredients.

NUT BRITTLE

1½ pounds

2 cups sugar
½ cup light corn sirup
¾ cup water
2 tablespoons butter or margarine
1 teaspoon vanilla
½ teaspoon baking soda
1½ cups roasted, salted nuts

Combine sugar, sirup, water, and fat in a large, heavy saucepan. Cook,

stirring only until sugar dissolves. Then cook mixture to 300° F., or until a few drops form hard, brittle threads in cold water. Remove from heat.

Stir in remaining ingredients. Pour over a greased baking sheet. Pull thinner while cooling, if desired. Cool and break into pieces.

Note: To use raw peanuts, add them and $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt to the sirup at 238° F., or when a drop makes a soft ball in cold water. Continue to cook as above.

CREAM OF NUT SOUP

6 servings

1 tablespoon butter or margarine
2 tablespoons finely chopped celery
2 tablespoons finely chopped onion
2 tablespoons flour
1 cup milk
2 cups chicken broth or bouillon
 $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon hickory salt or Worcestershire sauce
1 cup salted pecans or cashews, finely chopped
Salt and pepper, as desired
Paprika or minced parsley, as desired

Melt fat in a large, heavy saucepan.

Add celery and onion; cook, stirring frequently until tender.

Blend in flour. Gradually stir in liquids, hickory salt or Worcestershire sauce, salt and pepper, and nuts. Bring to a boil and cook 1 minute longer, stirring as needed.

Garnish with paprika or parsley.

CREAM OF PEANUT BUTTER SOUP

Reduce flour to 1 tablespoon in the above recipe. Blend in $\frac{3}{4}$ cup peanut butter before adding liquids. Omit other nuts.

SUNDAE NUT SIRUP

6 servings

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup pecans or English walnuts, chopped
2 tablespoons butter or margarine, melted
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup brown sugar, packed
2 tablespoons water
2 tablespoons light corn sirup

Stir the nuts in the fat over low heat until lightly browned. Add the remaining ingredients. Simmer for 2 minutes.

Serve warm over ice cream.

An array of nuts—including Indian nuts (pine nuts or piñon), coconut, cashews, pistachios, pecans, mixed nuts, Macadamias, and peanuts.

